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David Arbel and Ran Edelist, *Western Intelligence and the Collapse of the Soviet Union 1980–1990.* London: Frank Cass, 2003. 338 pp.

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The role of intelligence in George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq shines a spotlight on an issue that makes most observers of national security affairs extremely uncomfortable, regardless of their political persuasion. After all, despite an estimated annual budget of $35 billion to $40 billion and many thousands of dedicated and bright employees using all the most sophisticated technologies available to the richest country on earth, the U.S. intelligence apparatus knew remarkably little about what was actually going on inside Iraq. How could this have happened? Why did senior U.S. officials repeatedly make statements of certitude to back their justifications for the war, assuring the public that these statements were based on "intelligence" and therefore, by implication, were credible?

The unfortunate truth is that the pattern of events during the eighteen months preceding the March 2003 invasion of Iraq bore a striking resemblance to the 1980s, when the United States and its vaunted intelligence apparatus were slow in recognizing the fundamental structural changes under way in the Soviet Union. These changes initially made the Soviet Union less of a military threat to the United States and then eventually pushed it into dissolution. In *Western Intelligence and the Collapse of the Soviet Union 1980–1990,* David Arbel and Ran Edelist chronicle what seems like a chillingly familiar refrain as they walk the reader through the decade in which the gradual implosion of the Soviet political and economic system and the increasing desperation of Soviet leaders were not fully appreciated by Western intelligence agencies and their political masters.

If the book contains one interesting implicit conclusion that is again relevant to current controversies, it is that the intelligence during the 1980s apparently played little if any role in fundamentally altering the ideological and political predispositions of senior decision-makers. As portrayed by Arbel and Edelist, senior official in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush essentially had their minds made up and were politically and intellectually vested in their view of the Soviet threat. As a result, they actively sought analysis from the intelligence community that would confirm their views and were unreceptive to any anomalous analysis. During the U.S. presidential campaign in 1979–1980, Reagan described Moscow's sponsorship of terrorist organizations around the world as part of a systematic and diabolical plot to destabilize the international system. In a related claim, Reagan's first director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), William Casey, firmly believed that the Soviet Union was aggressively confronting the West throughout the Third World. Using interviews with former intelligence analysts, notably former senior CIA analyst Melvin Goodman, Arbel and Edelist argue that no hard intelligence existed to support these

wild claims. Even so, senior political officials ordered the intelligence system to turn out a product that conformed to their preexisting worldviews. Sound familiar?

In a particularly depressing and again familiar refrain, Arbel and Edelist recount the rise of CIA officials like Robert Gates, who provided analysis that the decision-makers wanted to hear. The result was an intelligence system incapable of delivering new or fresh analysis. As the authors note: "The common political orientation of the intelligence professionals and the political elite over the years produced a rigid conceptual conformity between the analysts and the decision-makers" (p. 118). The result was a self-reinforcing system that delivered politically acceptable analysis. Officials who produced appropriately couched assessments were promoted and rewarded by their political masters.

Although intelligence analysis in the 1980s may have had little effect on the country's political leaders, the selective use of intelligence assessments proved extremely important in bureaucratic and political contexts. The intelligence estimates of the 1980s and the Defense Department's slick handbooks on *Soviet Military Power* were cited as justification for the massive increases in defense spending and the resulting explosion of the federal budget deficit during the Reagan administration. The information also specifically justified a number of weapons systems—the B-1 and B-2 bombers to name two—that were all but militarily irrelevant by the time they had been funded and built at a cost of countless wasted billions. The Reagan-era Strategic Defense Initiative, which was sold to the public in the 1980s via inflated estimates of the Soviet threat, is still with us today (albeit under a different name), consuming many billions of dollars to produce what is widely seen as a technically flawed system that will not protect the country against the most likely threats of the twenty-first century. All these situations are usefully chronicled by Arbel and Edelist.

The strength of the book lies in its interesting vignettes. The authors draw on interviews with officials from all sides of the conflict, including former high-ranking Soviet officials, senior members of the Bush and Reagan teams, and former officials in the West European intelligence services. But the strength of the book is also a weakness: it is poorly organized, and the reader is forced to labor through a discombobulated story stitched together in a haphazard fashion.

Any serious student of national security affairs should be rightfully suspicious of after-action analyses pointing out things that in hindsight should have seemed obvious at the time. Arbel and Edelist paint a depressing portrait of an intelligence bureaucracy during the 1980s that was hampered by its own organizational predispositions and was ultimately more interested in serving its political leaders, who in turn rewarded that system with funding and political patronage. But the picture was and is more complicated than it appears in hindsight. Intelligence exists to support an operationally oriented environment in which it is difficult to see issues in a truly strategic context. That is the curse and the opportunity for intelligence—to meet both challenges simultaneously. The central issue facing the policy community—as true today as it was in the 1980s—is to give the intelligence community sufficient leeway to generate a product that meets the needs of the customer but is also in conformity with the most reliable evidence.